

The God of Creation
Genesis 1:1-5
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I've been thinking lately of writing a book. I have a few ideas bouncing around, but my problem is I'm not sure how to start it. Not the first chapter or the first page, but the first words. How would you start your book? "Once upon a time?" Think about how some of the most famous book beginnings you know. "Call me Ishmael" from "Moby Dick." Or "All children except one, grow up." That's "Peter Pan." How about "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." That's Dickens' "Tale of Two Cities." Here's another one: "The sun did not shine. It was too wet to play. So we sat in the house all that cold, cold, wet day." That's how Dr. Suess starts "The Cat in the Hat."

The author of Genesis chose an incredibly understated way to start the most famous book in history. "In the beginning." Those words launch a story that has profoundly shaped history and culture to this day. Who knew that three little words could be the start of a book that inspires such great faith and such great controversy? "In the beginning." This opening statement has amazing intellectual and personal implications, and we'll look at both this morning.

Here's what I want to know: In the beginning of what? That's a very dangerous question. Because as soon as you start asking questions about the Bible, you have to start looking for answers. The Bible in general, and the creation story in particular, has been mined repeatedly for answers to all the significant and meaningful questions in life. And some people have claimed to have found all the answers. Really? If they've found all the answers, I'm not sure they're asking the right questions.

Let me explain that statement this way. A four-year-old boy came to his mother one day and said, "Mommy, where did I come from?" The mother, caught off-guard, began hemming and hawing, trying to figure out how to appropriately answer. She mumbled something about when a man and woman really love each other, they hold hands until a stork comes to give the woman an epidural and brings a baby in a basket. The boy looked puzzled for a second, then said, "That's weird, because Jimmy said he comes from Indiana."

When we are looking for answers, we have to be sure we understand the question, or else we may end of finding a perfectly plausible answer to the wrong question. I believe this happens a lot with the creation story at the beginning of Genesis. As you know, you can use certain passages in the Bible to prove just about anything, if those passages are taken out of their context or used in ways there weren't meant to be used.

The creation story is a good example of this. I'm in no way condemning or condoning a particular scientific understanding of how we got to where we are, be it creationism or evolution or the Big Bang Theory or intelligent design. But what I have learned is that the book of Genesis wasn't written to for that purpose. There is not a single example of God revealing scientific information to the Israelites. God never says, "Let's watch this filmstrip about how photosynthesis works." Using Genesis to support a scientific hypothesis is like using a cookbook to learn how to fix a car or using a Picasso painting to explain human anatomy.

In other words, when we approach Genesis, we have to be sure we're asking the right questions. We shouldn't ask, "Can I use Genesis to defend this or that theory of creation?" We should ask, "What is God trying to tell me here? What can I learn about my faith through this story?" We shouldn't ask, "What does this story say about us?" We should ask, "What does this story say about God?"

Our thoroughly modern understanding of how things work has led us to the prevailing belief that the only truth is scientific truth. That's the way our brains have been conditioned to work. But what the Bible challenges us to ask is this: For something to be true, does it have to have a purely scientific explanation? I know how the rotation of the earth works in relation to the solar system, but does that mean it isn't true to say the sun rises and sets? Scientifically, that may not be true. But experientially it is absolutely true.

We can't prove the events of the creation story. But we don't have to, because the Bible and science aren't trying to do the same things. Instead, they could be seen as working in harmony with one another. My understanding of harmony is that different notes and different voices combine together to make the final product. Likewise, scripture and science work in harmony to help us try and understand what is ultimately not understandable. In fact, you could say that science is one way of describing the work of God in this world.

OK, enough intellectualizing. Let's go back and see if we can the right question. What *does* this story tell us about God? In these first few verses, we learn a lot about God. First of all, God's primary role is Creator. In fact, the Hebrew word for "create" is only used in the Bible to describe what God does. Humans don't create. We may move things around and put things together in new ways, but only God creates.

And what God creates in these first few verses is profound. When we enter the story, there is chaos. The earth was formless and empty and darkness reigned. As I've shared with you before, the Hebrew for "formless and empty" is "tovuvabohu," which sounds like what it is. In fact, I learned from a German teacher that Germans use that same word to mean "ruckus" or "mess," as in, "You've sure made a tovuvabohu of things!"

What God does is take the tovuvabohu and make order out of it. There's nothing sinister or evil about this chaos. It simply means that God has not finished working. The Spirit of God hovers over the waters and God says, "Let there be light" and separates the light from the darkness, creating our understanding of time. How do you mark time without day and night? You can't. What God does here is order our lives by giving us day and night.

It's important to talk about these events in the present tense. I've made the point that this isn't science, but it also is not history. There's a song in our hymnal called "Creator God, Creating Still," and that's the mindset we should have when digesting this story. Instead of saying, "God created the world," we can say, "The word is God's creation."

This has important implications for our lives because it means God is still creating, still at work. And that's a very good thing, because I certainly see a lot of chaos in my world and in my life. We've sure made a tovuvabohu of things, haven't we? Whether it's something we've brought on ourselves, or something brought on by our aging bodies or the capriciousness of life, it would easy to convince someone that the world is formless and empty and chaos reigns.

But the presence of chaos simply means that God has not finished working. God still has a creating word to speak into our world and into our lives, sending us God's spirit to hover over us and around us and bring order out of chaos. God has not called this world to be chaotic, fragmented or in conflict, and God will stay with it until it becomes what it has been created to be. God doesn't cause the chaos, but God can work through the chaos for God's purposes.

But God is not the only one with work yet to do here on earth. As the creation, we have a role to play, as well. This story tells us it is the Creator's job to speak, and it is the created's job to listen and respond. God says, "Let there be light" and the creation responds with light. God says, "Be fruitful and multiply" and storks start showing up with epidurals. God says, "Go and make disciples of all nations" and people are touched and lives are changed.

But we can't respond as God's creation if we aren't listening to the Creator. We are called to listen, to pay attention, to look for answers to the question, "What does this tell us about God?" and then to tell others what we discover. God is not sitting back waiting for us to get it right. God is active in this world, working to make it the creation God called it to be. And we should be active doing the same thing.

I know there's still chaos out there. And in here. So many bad things that happen to good people. So much suffering. So much sickness. So much tovuvabohu. We've been in the hospital beds, we've been in the funeral homes, we've stared at the stack of overdue bills. So many questions that seem to go cruelly unanswered. So many endings – of dreams, of promises, of lives.

But the good news of this story is that our God is a God of beginnings. Not just repetitions or moving pieces around or rehashing old patterns. God is a God of beginnings, of order in the midst of chaos, of resurrections. To all our questions, God provides an answer. It's not a scientific answer. It's not an historical answer. It's something so much more. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was God." God is not doing working yet..

Are you?